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MATT 17:1-9 AS A VISION OF A VISION: A NEGLECTED STRAND IN THE PATRISTIC RECEPTION OF THE TRANSFIGURATION ACCOUNT¹

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Abstract

This article points to a strand in the reception history of the Transfiguration account that is generally neglected in biblical and patristic scholarship. According to Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, ps.-Ephrem Syrus, Anastasius the Sinaite, John of Damascus, and the Byzantine hymnographic tradition, Matthew's account is not only a vision that the disciples have of Christ, but also a vision granted to Moses and Elijah, witnessed by the disciples. Relating Matthew's account of a vision on Tabor with the biblical vision reports of Moses and Elijah at Sinai was crucially important for early Christians: (a) it underlay their appropriation of the Scriptures of Israel as "Old Testament", by using exegetical procedures that find their closest analogon in the "rewritten Bible" characteristic of certain strands of Second Temple Judaism; (b) it lent itself to polemical use against dualism and monarchianism; (c) it was eventually absorbed into Byzantine festal hymnography, thereby gaining wide acceptance in Byzantine theology.

1. Introduction

Ulrich Luz's three volumes on Matthew in the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* series (available for the English-speaking world in the Hermeneia series), the monumental Davies-Allison commentary, Allison's *Studies in Matthew*, as well as a host of other works on the textual transmission and the reception history of Matthew in early Christianity,² all bear witness to the fact that the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Gospel of Matthew—in fact, the reception

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense LVIII (University of Leuven, July 2009). I am grateful to my Teaching Assistant, Mr. Benjamin Burkholder, for his help in proofreading the manuscript at several stages.

2 Massaux 1990 (1950); Koester 1957; Morgan 1969; Köhler 1987; Stanton 2001; Racine 2004; Min 2005; Bucur 2007.

history of the Bible in general—is now regarded as a necessary part of biblical scholarship.³

In what follows I would like to approach the Transfiguration account in Matt 17:1-9 from a reception-historical perspective. This is certainly not a new or under-researched area in scholarship. Jarl Fossum has offered a thorough analysis of the Transfiguration traditions in early Christian apocryphal writings, while Michel Aubineau, Peter Chamberas, Roselyne de Feraudy, John McGuckin, Andreas Andreopoulos, and Michel van Parys have been near-exhaustive in illustrating the rich reception history that the Transfiguration account has had in the patristic and medieval literature of the Christian East and West.⁴ Nevertheless, certain crucial elements of the early Christian reception of Matt 17:1-9, have been overshadowed or even forgotten in scholarship, and thus need to be revisited. I have in mind, more specifically, the interpretation of the Transfiguration as a “vision of a vision”: a vision granted to Moses and Elijah, witnessed by the disciples.

2. The Vision on Tabor and the Vision on Sinai

New Testament scholars have not failed to notice the evident echo of Sinai present in Matt 17:

For Matthew the first purpose of the manifestation is to recall Exod 24 and 34 . . . Jesus is the prophet like Moses (cf. Deut 18:15, 18) . . . The eschatological prophet, the one like Moses and Elijah, has appeared, and the light of the resurrection and *parousia* has already shown forth.⁵

Jesus’ transfiguration moves thoughts back and forward in time: it is a replay of Sinai and a foretaste of things to come . . . the mount of Transfiguration was, for the evangelists, including Matthew, a second Sinai, where a miracle of old was repeated.⁶

Some have suggested the existence, in the background of the synoptic Transfiguration account, of an older Christology that sought to establish Jesus as a Moses-like figure, superior to the old prophet *in degree*. The transition from that sort of “prophetic Christology” to a Christology that insisted on a difference *in kind* between Moses and Jesus, the unique Son of God, could very well have happened with Mark:

3 Luz 1989; Luz 1994; Luz 2006; Allison 2005 (see esp. 117–31).

4 Fossum 1995a; Fossum 1995b; Aubineau 1967; Chamberas 1970; de Feraudy 1978; McGuckin 1986; Andreopoulos 2005; van Parys 2007.

5 Davies and Allison 1991, 705.

6 Allison 1993, 246; 247.

By a subtle redaction which has amounted to removing the radiant face motif, transforming the two angels of covenant into Moses and Elijah, relocating the awe of the disciples away from the cloud theophany towards the appearance of the prophets, introducing the correction of Peter by means of a patronizing excuse, and finally reintroducing the theophany words from God now as *Bath Qol* to throw all our attention specifically onto Jesus alone—by means of such editorial reworkings, then, Mark has effectively removed the last lingering vestiges of prophetic Christology from the story and pointed us quite clearly in the Christological direction subsequently explicated by the patristic church.⁷

By the time of the First Gospel, according to Allison, “Jesus’ superiority to Moses is only a very minor theme of the transfiguration narrative”, because “the superiority of Jesus to Moses is an assumption of our Gospel more than it is an assertion”, so that “given Jesus’ assumed superiority, the more one exalted Moses, the more one exalted Jesus”.⁸

It is noteworthy that Matthew is the only Gospel that refers to the Transfiguration as a “vision” (ὄραμα, Matt 17:9). We may want to ask: whose vision? And a vision of what? McGuckin finds that the answers provided by patristic interpreters fall into several categories: christological (“the vision of Christ’s radiance as a manifestation of his own essential deity”); soteriological (a vision of the human being deified *in via*); and eschatological (a vision of the resurrection glory *in patria*).⁹

Less explored in scholarship is a strand in the reception history of the Transfiguration accounts which interprets the event not only as a vision that the disciples have of Christ, but as a vision of Christ granted to Moses and Elijah, witnessed by the disciples.¹⁰ The representatives of this approach include Irenaeus, Tertullian, Ps.-Leo of Rome, Ps.-Ephrem, Anastasius the Sinaite, John Damascene, and Cosmas of Maiouma. In various ways, and for a variety of reasons, these writers link Tabor with Sinai—specifically with the vision at the burning bush (Exod 3:3)¹¹ and with God’s refusal to show his face (Exod 33:20)—

7 McGuckin 1986, 18 (for more details see 14-18). See also Thrall 1970; Goulder 2000. According to Goulder, Mark is correcting an older prophetic Christology, attributable to Jesus’ relatives (206-208), which presented Jesus as a new Moses and a new Elisha: “Mark himself rejected any prophet-like-Moses Christology: to him Jesus was the Son of God who ‘came’” (203); “At first perhaps the movement asked, If John was Elijah, who is Jesus?; and so tales were told of him assimilated to the Elisha stories. But with time ... Jesus took on the colours of both figures. Mark does not like this: to him John was Elijah all right, but Jesus is the Son of God. Only, the stories he tells give the background Christology away” (199).

8 Allison 1993, 247-248; 275.

9 McGuckin 1986, 100, 125, 117, 122.

10 As an exception, see Hall 1987, esp. 43-44.

11 One of the authors, Anastasius the Sinaite, draws this connection by exploiting the link between Matt 17:9 (τὸ ὄραμα) and Exod 3:3 (τὸ ὄραμα τὸ μέγα).

and identify the transfigured Jesus with the mysterious ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν at the burning bush.

According to the Septuagint, in response to Moses' request to see God's glory more intimately (δειξόν μοι τὴν σεαυτοῦ δόξαν, Exod 33:18), God states (Exod 33:19) that he will indeed manifest himself to Moses—by parading in his glory (παρελεύσομαι πρότερός σου τῆ δόξῃ μου) and by proclaiming the divine name (κύριος) before the prophet, and showing him his back parts (τὰ ὀπίσω μου)—but insists on the impossibility of a more complete revelation: Οὐ δύνησῃ ἰδεῖν μου τὸ πρόσωπον; τὸ δὲ πρόσωπόν μου οὐκ ὀφθήσεται σοι (Exod 33:20, 23).¹²

Some early Christians interpreted this to mean that the vision face to face, refused to Moses, was being postponed for a later time. Irenaeus of Lyon, for instance, writes:

[Exod 33:20-22] signifies two things, namely that it is impossible for man to see God, and that man will see Him in the latter times on the summit of rock, thanks to God's wisdom: that is in His coming as man. And it is for this reason that he conferred with him face to face on the top of the mountain [at Transfiguration], while Elijah was also present (as the Gospel relates), thus fulfilling in the end the ancient promise (*restituens in fine pristinam repromissionem*, ἀποκαταστήσας ἐν τῷ τέλει τὴν πρότεραν ἐπαγγελίαν).¹³

Evidently, Tabor “fulfils the ancient promise” only on the assumption that the Christ on Tabor is the very one who summoned Moses on Sinai. The same holds true for Elijah whose theophanic experience on Horeb/Sinai Irenaeus mentions immediately after that of Moses.¹⁴

For Tertullian also, the “Face of God” that Moses desires to see is, in fact, the Son. Indeed, it is the Son of God who “was visible before the days of his flesh”, and “appeared to the prophets and the patriarchs, as also to Moses indeed himself”.¹⁵ To be sure, Tertullian explains, the Son's apparitions to patriarchs and prophets, including Moses, were always somewhat veiled and imperfect—in *speculo et aenigmate et visione et somnio*. The reason is that they occurred “according to the faculties of men, not in accordance with the full glory of the Godhead (*secundum hominum capacitates, non secundum plenitudinem divinitatis*)” since “the Son . . ., considered in himself (*suo nomine*), is invisible, in that He is God and the Word and Spirit of God”.¹⁶ A more perfect vision of the Face of God—i.e., of the Son—than was available to Moses on Sinai (or for Isaiah and Ezekiel in Zion or its heavenly representation) was reserved for Tabor:

12 I am using the LXX because the patristic writers I will discuss were using the Greek Bible.

13 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.20.9 (Latin text and Greek retroversion in SC 100/2: 656-657).

14 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.20.10-11.

15 Tertullian, *Prax.* 14.6-7.

16 Tertullian, *Prax.* 14.7, 14.2, 14.6.

He reserves to some future time (*servat ... in futurum*) his presence and speech face to face with Moses—for this was afterwards fulfilled (*adimpletum est*) in the retirement of the mount [of Transfiguration], as we read in the Gospel, “Moses appeared, talking with him”.¹⁷

Tertullian offers the same interpretation elsewhere: Exod 33 is a *promise* given on Sinai, which is fulfilled on Tabor, when Moses finally contemplates the Face of God, the Son, in the glory of the Transfiguration.¹⁸ Origen echoes this view—only briefly, however, before moving on to what he regards as “more mystical” considerations.¹⁹

This type of exegetical linking of Sinai and Tabor carries on in orations and hymns of the Transfiguration by Ps.-Leo of Rome, Ps.-Ephrem Syrus, Anastasius the Sinaite, and John Damascene. In Ps.-Ephrem’s *Sermon on the Transfiguration*, for instance, one reads:

There was joy for the Prophets and the Apostles by this ascent of the mountain. The Prophets rejoiced when they saw his humanity, which they had not known. The Apostles also rejoiced when they saw the glory of his divinity, which they had not known ... and they looked to one another: the Prophets to the Apostles and the Apostles to the Prophets. There the authors of the old covenant saw the authors of the new (οἱ ἀρχηγοὶ τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης τοὺς ἀρχηγοὺς τῆς νέας).²⁰

17 Tertullian, *Prax.* 14.7.

18 Tertullian, *Marc.* 4.22.14-15: “And if we call to mind the promise (*commemoremur promissionis*) to Moses, here it will be seen fulfilled. For when Moses asked to have sight of the Lord, and said, *If now I have found grace in thy sight, manifest thyself to me, that I may knowledgeably see thee* [Exod 33:13] what he looked for was that aspect in which he was to live his human life, which as a prophet he was aware of—but God’s face, he had already been told, *no man shall see and live*—and God answered, *This word also which thou hast spoken, I will do it for thee* [Exod 33:20]. And again Moses said, *Shew me thy glory*: and the Lord answered, concerning the future, as before, *I will go before <thee> in my glory* [Exod 33:18-19] and what follows. And at the end, *And thou shall see then my later parts* [Exod 33:23] not meaning his loins or the calves of his legs, but the glory he had asked to see, though it was to be revealed to him in later times. In this glory he had promised to be visible to him face to face, when he said to Aaron, *And if there shall be a prophet among you, I shall be known to him in a vision, and shall speak to him in a vision, not as to Moses: to him I shall speak mouth to mouth, in full appearance*, the full appearance of that manhood which he was to take upon him, *and not in an enigma*” [Num 12:6-8].

19 Origen, *Comm. Mt.* 12.43.

20 For the Greek text, see Ὁσίου Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου Ἔργα (7 vols; ed. K.G. Phrantzolas; Thessaloniki: Το Περιβόλι της Παναγιᾶς, 1998), 7:13-30. An English translation is available online at www.anastasis.org.uk/on_the_transfiguration.htm. The translator, Ephrem Lash, notes: “The numbering of the sections is my own, for ease of reference. It is clear that the present form of the text cannot go back to the fourth century. Sections 13, 16 and 17 use the technical language of Chalcedon in 451 and the long section 15 is also redolent of the fifth

Andreopoulos notes that “this mutual recognition ... stressed the harmonization of the two covenants and the unity of the Church, but it also delineated the Transfiguration as a dynamic field of recognition”.²¹ I think it important to emphasize a different point: Ps.-Ephrem’s juxtaposition assumes that the Lord who revealed himself to Moses and Elijah on Sinai *is the same Lord* who summoned Peter, James, and John to join him on Tabor.

Anastasius the Sinaite writes in similar fashion:

Today the ancient heralds (κήρυκες) of the Old and the New Testaments have both wonderfully gathered with God on the mountain, of wonderful mysteries having become recipients. ... And present with those leaders (μεθ’ ὧν κορυφαίων) of the New Covenant was also Moses—that leader (κορυφαῖος) of the Law, that divine initiate of the mysteries—with Elijah the Tishbite.²²

Despite the ultimate subordination of Sinai’s inferior revelation to that of Tabor,²³ it is important to note that the very juxtaposition of the κήρυκες and κορυφαῖοι of the two covenants (cf. the ἀρχηγοί in Ps.-Ephrem) rests on an identification of the theophanic subject of Sinai/Horeb with that of Tabor. This identification is made explicit elsewhere, when Anastasius specifies the content of Moses’ vision on Tabor by appealing to Exod 3:14 and Exod 33:

Now I have seen you, the truly existing one (τὸν ὄντως ὄντα)... you, who said on the mountain, *I am He-Who-Is* [Exod 3:14]. ... I have seen you, whom of old I desired to see, saying, *show yourself clearly to me* (γνωστῶς εἶδω σε)²⁴... I have seen you, no longer as you revealed your back [ὀπισθοφανῶς] and turned me away on the rock of Sinai, but made visible to me clearly [ὥς ὀπανόμενός μοι] on the rock of Tabor.²⁵

The views of Ps.-Ephrem and Anastasius are echoed by John of Damascus and Cosmas of Maiouma, whose compositions remain, to this day, part of the official Transfiguration hymnography in Eastern Christianity. Thus, for instance, in John

century rather than the fourth.” Nevertheless, the passage in this homily most relevant to my argument (Ἔργα 7:18-19 = section 9 in the English translation) may very well go back to the real Ephrem (cf. *Nat.* 1.34-36; *Epiph.* 8.2-3). See also van Parys 2007, 252: “Même si le texte grec préservé porte les marques d’une réécriture christologique chalcédonienne, cette homélie conserve l’empreinte du lyrisme poétique syriaque”.

21 Andreopoulos 2005, 73.

22 Guillou 1955, 239: 15-17; 246:5-7. For a presentation of the homily, see Guillou 1955, 230-236; 257-258; van Parys 2007, 253-259.

23 Tabor is “another Sinai,” but that which it grants in ἀντιμίμοις θεοφανείας trumps Sinai’s σξιώδεις θεοπτίας (Guillou 1955, 240, 1-2); this remark is the opening salvo of a long section structured by ἐκεῖ ... ἐνταῦθα.

24 cf. Exod 33:13, ἐμφάνισόν μοι σεαυτόν· γνωστῶς ἴδω σε

25 Guillou 1955, 247:11-12; 15-16; 248:1-2

Damascene's oration on the Transfiguration, Peter learns on Tabor that the ancient revelation on Sinai, "I am He-Who-Is", coincides with his own confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God":

Today, the great prince of the new covenant [Peter], who clearly proclaimed that Christ was the Son of the living God, saw the leader of the old covenant [Moses] standing beside Him [Christ] who set the law of both; and he gave a piercing cry: "This is He-Who-Is [Exod 3:14], who raised me up as prophet and sent me out as a man and a prince of the new people".²⁶

This point—Christ "setting the law of both covenants" and being both the one who revealed himself to Moses as "He-Who-Is" and the one confessed by Peter as Messiah and Son of God—is further developed by the Damascene:

He who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, I am He who is [Exod 3:14] was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the disciples . . .²⁷

You were seen by Moses on the mountain of the Law and again on Tabor; formerly in the darkness but now in the unapproachable light of godhead.²⁸

The same christological interpretation of OT theophanies occurs in an anonymous Georgian homily on the transfiguration, whose Greek original dates to the end of the fourth century.²⁹

26 John of Damascus, *Oration on the Transfiguration* 2 (McGuckin 1986, 206). I have capitalized "He-Who-Is" in order to make clearer the reference to Exod 3:14.

27 Great Vespers of Transfiguration, Apostichon (*Menaion*, 476). Except where indicated, the English translation of the hymns is taken from *The Festal Menaion* (1969) and *The Lenten Triodion* (1977), modified only to conform to contemporary use of pronouns and verbs.

28 Second Canon of Transfiguration: Ode 1, Sticheron 3 (McGuckin 1986, 202).

29 For an edition of the Georgian text accompanied by a French translation, see van Esbroeck, 1980. The text was composed in Antioch (or another city under its jurisdiction) around 380-400, and translated directly from Greek into Georgian (van Esbroeck 1980, 418, 422). The homilist explains that only those accustomed to approach the mountain that smoked (Exod 19:18) and to enter the luminous darkness (Exod 24:16-18) were summoned on the mountain of the Transfiguration (ch. 13, 440/441); he pictures Moses and Elijah addressing Jesus directly (and thereby revealing their identity to Peter): Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea by "your blessed power" (ch. 11, 438/439); Elijah speaks of "your people" worshipping Baal and killing "your prophets" (ch. 12, 438/439); he ascribes his own rapture into heaven to Jesus, and identifies the latter as "he who bowed down the heavens" and "he who touches the mountains and they smoke" in Pss 143:5 and 103/104:32 (ch. 12, 440/441); finally, it was the "terror of your glory" on Horeb that overwhelmed Elijah and forced him to cover his face (1 Kgs 19:11-12), the same glory that is now displayed "in your servant-form" due to "your love of humankind" (ch. 12, 440/441).

3. Not a Marginal Strand of Interpretation

It is quite obvious, from the texts surveyed so far, that an important segment of patristic and Byzantine exegesis regards the Transfiguration not only as a vision that the disciples have of Christ, but, so to speak, as a vision of a vision: a vision that the disciples have of Moses and Elijah gazing on the transfigured Jesus because they have gazed upon the same “Lord” before on Sinai. Through Cosmas of Maiouma and John Damascene, this christological reading of the divine manifestation on Sinai was absorbed into Byzantine festal hymnography, thus becoming widespread and theologically normative.³⁰ The hymnography of the Presentation, for instance, is replete with it, stating that it is the very Lawgiver who thundered on Sinai that is now brought to the Temple:

Today Simeon takes in his arms the Lord of Glory whom Moses saw of old in the darkness, when on Mount Sinai he received the tables of the Law . . .³¹

Receive, O Simeon, Him whom Moses once beheld in darkness, granting the Law on Sinai, and who has now become a babe subject to the Law, yet this is the One who spoke through the law! . . .³²

The Ancient of Days, who in times past gave Moses the Law on Sinai, appears this day as a babe. As Maker of the Law, He fulfills the Law, and according to the Law He is brought into the temple.³³

The same perspective occurs in the hymns celebrating the Jordan Baptism. The Baptist is petrified, because it is no less than the “Lord” revealed to Moses on Sinai who now condescends to be baptized:

Moses, when he came upon You, displayed the holy reverence that he felt: perceiving that it was Your voice that spoke from the bush, he forthwith turned away his gaze [Exod 3:6]. How then shall I behold You openly? How shall I lay my hand upon You?³⁴

30 See Bucur 2009.

31 Presentation of the Lord: Sticheron at the Lity (*Menaion*, 413).

32 Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at *Lord I have cried* (*Menaion*, 408).

33 Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at the Lity [*Menaion*, 412]. See also: “Today He who once gave the Law to Moses on Sinai submits Himself to the ordinances of the Law, in His compassion becoming for our sakes as we are . . .”. (Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at the Lity [*Menaion*, 412]); “Today the holy Mother, who is higher than any temple, has come into the temple, disclosing to the world the Maker of the world and Giver of the Law” (Small Vespers of the Presentation: *Glory* Sticheron [*Menaion*, 407]).

34 First Canon of Theophany: Ode 4 Sticheron (*Menaion*, 370)

If I baptize You, I shall have as my accusers the mountain that smoked with fire [Exod 19:18], the sea which fled on either side, and this same Jordan which turned back [Ps 113/114:5].³⁵

In fact, the exegetical connection between Sinai and Tabor is also reflected in the readings assigned for the Feast of Transfiguration in Byzantine Christianity: the texts selected to explicate Christ's appearance on Tabor are Exod 24 (the anthropomorphic appearance of the Lord to the seventy elders on Sinai), Exod 33 ("the promise"), and 3 Rgns / 1 Kgs 19 (Elijah at Horeb).

It is quite obvious that we are not dealing with a marginal strand of interpretation. Indeed, none of the patristic authors has been read so extensively and with such unconditional acceptance as these hymns, which have been (and continue to be) chanted, listened to, and called to mind by believers from almost all times and places. Even in Latin-speaking Christianity, despite Augustine's bold move to reinterpret theophanies as created, evanescent manifestations,³⁶ which gradually imposed itself as normative in the West, the pre-Augustinian view continued to be affirmed in hymns such as the Latin "O Antiphons" of Advent and the ninth-century hymn *Veni Immanuel*,³⁷ as well as in manuscript illuminations.³⁸

4. The Vision of Tabor and the Vision of Habakkuk³⁹

The Transfiguration is sometimes understood not only in light of Sinai, but also in light of later prophetic visions. According to Tertullian, for instance,

We find also in Habakkuk the complete outline of this vision (*habitus visionis istius*), where the Spirit speaks in the person of the apostles (*ex persona apostolorum*) sometime to be, "Lord, I have heard thy hearing and was afraid" (Hab 3:2). What hearing, other than of that voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, hear him" (Luke 9:35)? "I considered thy works and was astounded" (Hab 3:2): when else than when Peter saw his glory, and "knew not what he said" (Luke 9:33)?

35 First Canon of Theophany: Ode 4 Sticheron (*Menaion*, 370).

36 See Studer 1971; Barnes 1999; Barnes 2003; Bucur 2008.

37 Antiphon for December 18: "Lord and Ruler (*Adonai et Dux*) of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and gave him the law in Sinai, come to redeem us with an outstretched arm!"; *Veni Immanuel: Veni, veni Adonai qui populo in Sinai legem dedisti vertice in majestate gloriae*, with its well-known English rendering "O come, O come, Thou Lord of Might /who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height /in ancient times didst give the law / In cloud, and majesty, and awe".

38 Examples can be adduced from the eleventh-century Ripoll Bible (Vat. Bib. Apost., Cod. Lat. 5729, fol. 6v) and Aelfric Paraphrase (Cotton Ms. Claudius B IV, fol. 105v), the twelfth-century *Winchester Bible* (fol. 5r), and the thirteenth-century Palatine Psalter (Cod. Pal. Gr. 381b, fol. 172r): in all these manuscript illuminations, Moses receives the Law from Jesus.

39 For a more detailed treatment of the patristic and later Byzantine exegesis of Hab 3:2, see Bucur and Mueller 2010.

“In the midst of two living creatures—Moses and Elijah—thou shalt be known” (Hab 3:2). ... And once more, Habakkuk again, “His virtue covered the heavens, with that cloud, and his glory will be as the light” (Hab 3:3-4) the light with which even his garments glistened. And if we call to mind the promise to Moses (Exodus 33), here it will be seen fulfilled.⁴⁰

In short, for Tertullian, Habakkuk’s exclamation, “O Lord, I have heard the report of You and was afraid” (Hab 3:2) is actually uttered *ex persona apostolorum*. Most importantly, the vision of the Lord, in his luminous glory, between the two living beings (Hab 3:2) is a vision of the transfigured Christ between Moses and Elijah. The language of “vision” is of significance in this passage: even though Tertullian is quoting the Gospel of Luke (given Marcion’s exclusive use of Luke), the linking of Tabor and Hab 3:2, which is crucial to his argument, is possible on the basis of Matt 17:9, which refers to the Transfiguration as ὄραμα.

Anastasio the Sinaite also links the vision on Tabor with the vision of Habakkuk: Jesus appears “between the two living beings” both on the Mountain of the Skull (between the two thieves, in a manner befitting the Cross, σταυροπρεπῶς) and on the Mountain of the Transfiguration, between Moses and Elijah, in a manner befitting God (θεοπρεπῶς).⁴¹

There is, however, no passage in the Hebrew text of Habakkuk that could suggest a vision of Christ between the two angels. The scriptural basis is afforded instead by the Septuagint, which at Hab 3:2 reads, “Lord, I have heard report of you, and was afraid: I considered your works, and was amazed: you will be known between the two living creatures”. In Latin-speaking Christianity, despite the Vulgate’s option for the Hebrew version of Hab 3:2 (“I have heard, O LORD, the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy”), the Old Latin, which followed the LXX (in medio duorum animalium innotesceris), continued to remain popular. One of the main reasons for this type of conservatism was the ongoing liturgical use of Hab 3 (“the prayer of Habakkuk”) as part of the so-called biblical odes—a series of biblical hymns that were used as part of the Daily Office of both Eastern and Western Christianity.⁴²

The LXX version of Hab 3:2 has had a rich reception history. Aside from the trinitarian exegesis of Origen,⁴³ the main interpretation is christological: “God

40 Tertullian, *marc.* 4.22.12-13.

41 Guillou 1955, 239.

42 Schneider 1949a, esp. 479–91 (“Die griechischen Oden im lateinischen Westen”); McNamara 2009, esp. 54. See also Schneider 1949b; Schneider 1949c; Schneider 1949d.

43 Origen, *Princ.* 1.3.4: (“we think that that expression also which occurs in the hymn of Habakkuk . . . ought to be understood of Christ and of the Holy Spirit”. Cf. Origen, *Hom. Isa.* 1.2 (PG 13:221B): “Quae sunt ista duo seraphim? Dominus meus Jesus et Spiritus

known between the two living beings” is the newborn Jesus between the ox and the ass (Cyril of Alexandria, Symeon the New Theologian, the Gospel of Ps.-Mt., Eleutherius of Tournai); Christ crucified between the two thieves (Hesychius of Jerusalem, Anastasius the Sinaite, Venerable Bede); Christ between his earthly life and his life after the resurrection (Cyril of Jerusalem); Christ between the human and the divine natures (Eusebius of Caesarea); Christ between the Old Testament and New Testament (Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, Jerome); and Christ between the present life and future life (Theodoret).⁴⁴

It is obvious that Tertullian’s connection between the vision of Habakkuk (Hab 3:2) and the vision on Tabor (Matt 17:1-9) is not unique in early Christianity. Aside from being echoed by Ps.-Leo of Rome, Anastasius the Sinaite, and the Venerable Bede, its hermeneutical foundation—the interpretation of Old Testament theophanies as Christophanies—is shared by the vast majority of interpreters of the first Christian millennium.

5. Sinai and Tabor: Not “Typology”!

The connection between the Taboric vision and the Old Testament visions of Moses, Elijah, and Habakkuk, is part of a larger exegetical and theological enterprise. The identification of the “Lord” Jesus with the Old Testament “Lord” who manifested himself to the patriarchs and prophets is, as a number of authors have shown, a constitutive element of early Christology, and can be traced back to the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of John, the Pauline corpus, and the catholic Epistle of Jude.⁴⁵ In the second century, apologists such as Justin Martyr use this type of “YHWH Christology” as the supreme argument against Trypho, by affirming that Christ is the One who appeared to Adam in the Garden of Eden, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and, especially, to Moses on Sinai. A second context in which theophanies play an important role is the anti-dualistic polemic of authors such as Irenaeus or Tertullian. Their argument that Christ is not a “new” God, rests upon the thesis that he has already manifested himself in the old dispensation. As can be seen in Tertullian’s *Against Praxeas*, theophanies were also invoked

sanctus”. See also Irenaeus, Epid. 10 (God is glorified by the Logos and the Spirit, who are identified with or in charge of “their powers”—the cherubim and seraphim); *Mar. Asc. Isa.* 9 (God is worshipped by the angel of the Logos and the angel of the Holy Spirit). For a discussion of these passages in conjunction with Origen, see Kretschmar 1956, 64–67, 73; Daniélou 1964 (1958), 134–140. See also, for connections with Philo, Lanne 1955.

44 For the references and a discussion of the texts, see Caprubi (1989); Harl (1999, 251–251, 287); Bucur and Mueller 2010.

45 Hanson 1965; Fossum 1987; Ellis 1994; Capes, 1992; Binni and Boschi 2004; Gieschen 2004 (with abundant references); Bauckham 2008. For the christological use of the divine Name in early Christianity, see Daniélou 1964 (1958), 147–163; Behr 2001, 62–66; Gieschen 2003.

against modalism: since Christ has appeared in OT theophanies, whereas the Father has not, it follows that the Son is distinct from the Father.⁴⁶

According to Alexander Golitzin, “[t]hat Jesus, Mary’s son, is the very One who appeared to Moses and the prophets—this is the consistent witness of the ante-Nicene Fathers, and remains foundational throughout the fourth century trinitarian controversies and the later christological disputes”.⁴⁷ In fact, reading OT theophanies as Christophanies is characteristic for the iconography, hymnography, and exegetical literature of the first Christian millennium. The problem we are facing is that the current scholarly categories for patristic exegesis are somewhat inadequate for a satisfactory definition of this type of exegesis.

With respect to one of the Transfiguration hymns (“He who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “I am He who is” [Exod 3:14] was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the disciples”), McGuckin notes the following: “Exod 3:14—the revelation in the burning bush at Horeb which in its illuminated radiance is taken as a type of Jesus’ radiance on Thabor”.⁴⁸ Chamberas, similarly, finds that Irenaeus “uses typology to explain the Transfiguration of Christ”; and Andreopoulos refers to the connection between Sinai and Tabor in patristic exegesis as a “fulfillment of typology”.⁴⁹

In my opinion, this verdict does not do justice to the above-mentioned interpretation of the Bible. In the case of a “type”–“antitype” relation, one would expect the interpreter to acknowledge a non-allegorical, non-christological level of the text (e.g., the historical event of Exodus, or the giving of the Law), and then posit a second—christological—level as the “fulfillment” of the OT “types”. Yet, in the exegesis of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Anastasius the Sinaite, and John Damascene discussed in this essay, Tabor is not “foreshadowed” by Sinai, and Christ is not signified typologically, but straightforwardly identified with the “Lord” in the OT narrative.

A more illuminating category would be “rewritten Bible”, which was coined by Geza Vermes in 1961 and widely utilized since then to designate biblical interpretation in Second Temple Judaism in writings such as the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Book of Giants*, *Jubilees*, *2 Enoch*, etc. It seems to me that the hymnographic and iconographic depiction of Moses receiving the law from Jesus, or Israel being led out of Egypt by Jesus, or Isaiah and Ezekiel seeing Jesus on the throne on the merkavah, find their closest analogon in various types of rewritten Bible in the Second Temple era, and in later writings of Jewish mysticism, which

46 See also the “Epistle of The Six Bishops” against Paul of Samosata and Eusebius of Caesarea against Marcellus (*De eccl. theol.* 2.2.1).

47 Golitzin 2009, xviii.

48 McGuckin 1986, 143n. 7.

49 Chamberas 1970, 49 (emphasis mine); Andreopoulos 2005, 197 (emphasis mine).

point out, for instance, that Moses received the Law in the course of an ascent to heaven, or, in the case of Jubilees, that the content of the heavenly law was dictated to Moses by the Angel of the Presence, as it had in fact been dictated earlier to some of the patriarchs, or, as in *3 Enoch*, that Moses received the Law as dictated by the highest angel Metatron.⁵⁰

6. Conclusions

Much of early Christian exegesis uses the Transfiguration account as a springboard for spiritual rumination. This approach, exemplified by the treatments of Origen, Augustine, and Maximus the Confessor, is generally well-known in biblical and patristic scholarship. The pages above, by contrast, have pointed to a different strand in the reception history of the Transfiguration account, which has been given less attention in scholarship. According to Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, Ps.-Ephrem Syrus, Anastasius the Sinaite, and the Byzantine hymnographic tradition, Matthew's account is not only a "vision" (Matt 17:9) that the disciples have of Christ, but, so to speak, a vision of a vision: a vision granted to Moses and Elijah, witnessed to by the disciples.

Relating Matthew's account of a vision on Tabor with the biblical vision reports of Moses and Elijah at Sinai was crucially important for early Christians. It underlay their appropriation of the Scriptures of Israel as "Old Testament", by using exegetical procedures that find their closest analogon in the "rewritten Bible" characteristic of certain strands of Second Temple Judaism; it lent itself to polemical use against dualism and monarchianism; finally, through John Damascene and Cosmas of Maiouma, it was absorbed into Byzantine festal hymnography, thereby gaining wide acceptance in Byzantine theology.

I conclude, therefore, that the interpretation of the (Matthean) Transfiguration account as a "vision of a vision", is an ancient and widespread interpretation of Matt 17:1-9, which, as its hymnographic and iconographic reception attests, has enjoyed unsurpassed popularity during the first Christian millennium.

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50 For a more extensive discussion see Bucur 2009, esp. 135-141.

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